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10-10-2018

Living a Feminist Life

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Citation of this paper:

Solga, Kim, "Living a Feminist Life" (2018). *Department of English Publications*. 194.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/englishpub/194>

***Living a Feminist Life* by Sara Ahmed**

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 312 pp, ISBN 9780822363194 (paperback)

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Very early in *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed asks:

Where is feminism? It is a good question. We can ask ourselves: where did we find feminism, or where did feminism find us? (p. 4)

I read these lines on the Tube. I can't remember where I was going, but I remember looking up, feeling the rocking of the carriage, hearing the sound of the train hit the points on the track. I met nobody's eyes (I try not to on the Tube), but I had trouble looking down again. Ahmed's words had pierced me.

I remembered early moments from my own life, then. Being told by my dad that I should grow my hair longer. That I needed to walk more softly. At school I was both praised and reprimanded for being a drama queen. After a while the external reprimands ended, and the internal ones took over. (More efficient.) I got to high school and was feisty, forceful – and rewarded for it. Except with boys.

At university I started to feel my power properly, but I still did not have a word for it. I definitely did not have the word feminist. I know this because in my second year I took a Shakespeare class from the great feminist pioneer Linda Woodbridge. I did not know who she was, and I did not bother to find out. She placed feminist readings of the plays lightly, carefully, around the edges of her teaching, probably because it was the 1990s and our department was embroiled in the Theory Wars. She gave us an option on our final essay to do a feminist analysis of the plays; instead I chose to write about villainy in *Othello*.

Eventually, I found feminism. (BIG TIME.) It found me first, though, in all of the tiny, inconsequential life moments I've just spent 300 words of my review proudly sharing with you. It still finds me, daily. It finds me when I second-guess writing choices (like this one; ask me how many times peer reviewers have scolded me for being too 'personal'). It finds me when I consider marginalizing the feminist angles in my teaching in not-feminist (??) courses. It finds me when I #metoo but then also put up with the small slights, the not-quite-but-not-not-quite patronizing comments that male colleagues make without thinking. It finds me when I tell myself they just weren't thinking, I need to be compassionate, they are working on it.

Reading Ahmed's book now is a revelation: it reveals, to me, the many ways I inhabit, but also inhibit, my own feminist project daily. It is a welcome reminder of my feminist genealogies, my feminist allies. It is a reminder of the serious challenges feminists face as we try to live and work in an honestly intersectional way. Ahmed shapes the book as a call to action; she expands upon the work she has previously done both in her academic writing on affect and in her public writing on her popular 'Feminist Killjoy' blog (<https://feministkilljoys.com>). She bends a variety of linguistic and intellectual tools with playful dexterity to her feminist will: these range from *willfulness* itself, to *sweaty concepts*, *brick walls*, and *feminist snap*, to name only a few. Her wordplay keeps her reader in the game, on her toes. She recounts stories of gaslighting, so similar they could all be of a piece (they are). And she imagines a feminist warrior, one unafraid of: disappointed parents; well-meaning colleagues with patriarchal hangovers; the university diversity squad; the tyranny of tick boxes; and much more. In the moment *before* the moment when #metoo went viral, Ahmed unleashed her feminist killjoy* and, I like to think, blew a mighty gust of wind up a nascent movement's skirts. She ends the book with a 'survival kit' for the feminist killjoy, followed by a 'killjoy manifesto': tools for daily living, to bear the lessons of the book forward beyond its final page (pp. 235-50, 251-68).

Living a Feminist Life is full of fire, of urging forward – especially for those who are *not* academic feminists, for those who might struggle to own the label 'feminist' at all. This is not a

scholarly book, speaking strictly; its secondary sources are limited, and Ahmed frequently cites herself. (This thrills me: it's a move aimed straight at the narcissistic boy-child inside the establishment academy's heart. Ahmed often accompanies it with citations of feminist fellow-travellers, which also makes it an act of inclusion disguised as self-aggrandizement.) I read a lot of the book over Christmas. I underlined little, but much of it stayed with me. I have recommended it to several students already.

Yet it is also a book filled with sadness, with exhaustion; it works hard to overcome them, but these things ache through. Ahmed left her job at Goldsmith's in 2016 after the university failed to act in response to allegations of sexual harassment that her work had uncovered. (The story behind this story is told at length in the book's second section, 'Diversity Work'.) So much of *Living a Feminist Life* is devoted to the back-breaking work such a *living* entails: when you are told, again and again, that the harassment you perceive is imagined; when you are asked, again and again, to keep your politics off the dinner table; when the joke isn't funny but you're told the problem is *actually* your sense of humour; when you're a queer Muslim feminist professor so you are assigned, over and over, the (uncompensated) job of ticking the university's diversity box, of putting a proper public face on institutionalized racism and misogyny.

When that's you, no wonder you are tired: rehearsing your stories of hurt to all who will listen, writing a book that is probably a bit too long and repetitive, that wanes in its third section and becomes a bit of a struggle to pick up and finish. And yet that very repetition – which *will* get wearing; be warned *but not* warned off – seems apt somehow. *Living a Feminist Life* reveals the relentlessness of a hard-lived feminist life: it celebrates our need to keep living the work, but it also demonstrates how easy it is to get sucked into the undertow.

*A killjoy: one who kills the joy of others precisely because their joy is dependent upon not recognizing her utter *lack* of joy in being relegated to their blind spots.

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